

Mission Parameters

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Mission Parameters

by [what_alchemy](#)

Summary

The soldier does not find the Mission. The soldier finds a tow-headed white child, aged approximately five years, unconscious and naked amid the empty Captain America uniform lying charred and bloody in the middle of what used to be a battleground. The soldier finds an expanse of bruised flesh and stubborn cowlicks that shine through the fog in his head.

The soldier lifts the child up and slings it under one arm before running.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

The soldier waits, but his handlers never come.

He circles the rooftop checkpoint, scanning the ground ten stories below, scanning the air, scanning other buildings. People talk on their phones. They sip their coffees. They laugh.

He's wet, and he wants to get out of his clothes. His arm creaks and grinds. He thinks the hollow lick in his belly is hunger, but he has a report to deliver. He has a punishment to endure.

They will come. He doesn't know what to do if they don't.

—

Pinned like—

What things are pinned?

(Insects and prey and butterflies too beautiful to live.)

Pinned like vermin and spinning, spinning. The Mission staggers above him, clutching his wounds — unacceptable. He should be dead by now, too much blood on the outside where it never should be, where the soldier made sure it would out. The Mission lists, but he is still standing, and he is still looking down at the soldier as if he sees salvation instead of death.

*The Mission lurches toward him, sapped of grace and heavy, but he gets to his knees anyway and he is wrenching the beam off of the soldier, his face twisted and damp, cheekbones stained red even as the rest of him goes pale. The soldier snarls as the space he's lodged in widens enough for him to start wriggling. The Mission's eyes are squeezed shut from the strain, and he growls with the exertion. Something low down down in the soldier's gut sparks to life. **But I knew him***

The Mission frees him with an almighty bellow and reels backward, panting.

The soldier is going to kill him, and his masters are going to thank him for it.

—

The soldier thinks he must have had a mother once. He sits outside a cafe nursing a tap water while mothers bustle around ignoring him, dragging children along by the hand, or pushing them in strollers, or hauling them strapped to their chests like floppy soft bombs. It makes sense the way all causes and effects make sense: the soldier, who is a living thing to go by the beat in his heart, must have emerged from a person. He must have squalled and raged to be in the world, and he must have been taken away for the good of it. He thinks this as he watches each mother who passes him by. He assesses the risks they pose. What they would do to him if he were a threat to their young. They would be formidable, he thinks. Not emotion: evolution. The primal logic of propagation. These mothers, they could damage his systems if they had to, even though he is bigger and stronger and never, ever loses.

Except the once.

—

You're my friend, the Mission says. I'm not gonna fight you.

He drops his shield. He stumbles. He is bleeding but not enough, not how he should be. Not in the manner in which the soldier was meant to make him bleed. He pitches backward off this sinking ship and the soldier—

There is a burn in his eyes. There is something inside him that hurts, but when he does a systems analysis, there is no accounting for it. He has his orders. He could call them complete right now. He could go back to his handlers without the shame of failure marking him to be punished.

But there are other orders. There is something unnamable, something big and hot and harsh the soldier cannot ignore, and it howls inside him until he dives along after the Mission.

Only when he drags the Mission to shore does the slashing of his innards cease. Only when he pinches the Mission's nose shut and breathes air into waterlogged lungs does a wash of cool soothe him. Only when he sees the Mission cough with proof of life does the soldier straighten and walk away.

The soldier does not question orders. That is not his place.

—

Weeks pass and no one comes for him.

He begins to remember things, like *Thou Shalt Not Steal*, but he does it anyway (food), he does it anyway (clothes), he does it anyway (money). He thinks there is a protocol for accepting punishment when he does something he is meant not to do—

Bless me Mary full of Grace who art in Heaven for I have sinned, the fruit of thy womb deliver us from evil, the Lord is with thee and the pains of hell

—but whatever those commands are, they hover like fog at the edges of his consciousness, and he cannot grasp at them.

—

He goes to the Smithsonian and learns he has a name.

—

He goes to a public library and learns he has a living sister.

—

He goes to where the Mission is staying with his mayfly friend because he knows he should follow orders. He knows he should complete orders. Order is righteous, orders are right, he has his orders and they are

incomplete

The Mission is recovering well, but he is enhanced and thus his rate of healing is not surprising.

And yet the soldier is surprised. He should be able to hear the bones in the Mission's wrists grind together when he grasps them, he should be able to span the Mission's waist with the circle of his hands, he should feel fear tighten in his gullet at the way a moist, hacking cough bounces between cracker box walls, he should he should he should—

Stay out of sight.

Gather information.

Follow his orders.

Complete the Mission.

His masters will be pleased with him when he is finally taken in and processed again. He will have done well. He will make his masters proud.

—

Sometimes the Mission puts on his most determined jaw and wades into firefights he has no business being in. The soldier disapproves.

From his vantage, always high, always with the clearest view of the Mission, the soldier fires with precision — no flair, no pride, just simple perfection — and neutralizes all threats.

If anyone is going to stop the pit pat pulse in the Mission's neck, it is going to be him.

And if the Mission whips around with a name on his lips the soldier cannot connect to himself, if the Mission screams at him to come out, to come talk to him, to face him—

The soldier doesn't have to listen. The Mission is not his commander, even if a traitorous spark inside him says otherwise.

—

There are things the soldier knows to be true.

1. Security is order.
2. Order is the highest imperative for the continuance of humanity's success in the future.
3. The soldier's work facilitates order.
4. The masters decide what order is.
5. No one is coming for him.

—

There are things the soldier knows to be true.

1. The Mission likes soft-serve ice cream cones in chocolate and vanilla swirl.
2. The Mission leaves food out on his stoop in variety of items the soldier might classify as his preferred foodstuffs, if pressed, if he had preferences, if he were *allowed* to have preferences.
3. The Mission does not lock his doors, which is foolish, because this is a high-crime area and he has always been too trusting.
4. The Mission draws with charcoal.
5. The Mission knows exactly where the soldier is at all times.

—

There are things the soldier knows to be true.

1. The threats against the Mission are increasing, always in a pattern, always like a parasite set to dismantle and destroy from the inside out.
2. The soldier's masters may not be coming for him, but they are coming for the Mission.
3. While the masters' authority is absolute when it comes to the soldier and his work, they are not to be trusted with the Mission.
4. Anyone could be a master.
5. He must take the Mission where the masters cannot find him.

—

The soldier is too late

one time, one

fucking

time

He is too late and when he arrives the masters have swarmed, the Widow is down and bleeding, the Falcon is fending off three combatants at once, and the soldier *cannot find the Mission, the Mission is lost, the Mission is gone, the Mission has been compromised, the Mission is in danger*. The soldier raises his rifle and his finger is itchy and it would be an indulgence, wouldn't it? It would be something just for the soldier, who is not meant to have desires, and it would feel good when he is not meant to feel anything, especially goodness, but there is a gruff southern voice in his head saying *damn Barnes you are a goddamn avenging angel with that thing, you know that?* and the soldier lets his finger do what it will.

A human skull does not pop when you put bullet in it, but that's what it feels like anyway, that child's play mouth sound, pop pop pop and the Falcon twisting around—

“Barnes! Barnes, he needs you! He went down! Find him!”

The soldier loves — *loves*, pure and true with a clean white-hot fire — an order.

The soldier does not find the Mission. The soldier finds a tow-headed white child, aged approximately five years, unconscious and naked amid the empty Captain America uniform lying charred and bloody in the middle of what used to be a battleground. The soldier finds an expanse of bruised flesh and stubborn cowlicks that shine through the fog in his head.

The soldier lifts the child up and slings it under one arm before running.

Running hard and never looking back.

It wakes up in the backseat of the '95 Toyota the soldier stole (*Bless me Father who art in Heaven it has been us sinners now and at the hour of our death since my last act of contrition O my God*) and pops up between the front seats, uncaring of the oversized t-shirt the soldier swaddled it in.

“Who are you?” it says. “Where are you taking me? You aren't allowed.”

“Hush up,” the soldier says, his voice a rough scratch at the base of his throat. The syllables feel foreign and strange on his tongue as it curls around an accent he didn't know he could mimic.

“Mr. Barnes?” the child says then. The soldier does a tone analysis: hesitant and hopeful. The soldier clenches his teeth. The child — the Mission, he knows damn well — shouldn't be this sharp, shouldn't know him, shouldn't be able to recognize him so quick. The exhibit at the Smithsonian said they'd been friends since they were children, but what child recognized a friend in an adult body? What game was this new Mission playing — or what game were the masters playing on the both of them?

“Go back to sleep,” the soldier says.

“Only, is Bucky coming too? Are we going to get him? I didn't know you had a car, Mr. Barnes, what's the make and model?”

Fact: children had mothers, or otherwise a human being who contributed half a child's DNA via egg.

Fact: children had fathers, or otherwise a human being who contributed half a child's DNA via sperm.

It follows that if the soldier had a mother, which he had already concluded given general knowledge and then confirmed in his visit to the Smithsonian, he must also have had a father, whom the Mission now believes to be the man with his foot on the gas pedal. The soldier. Mr. Barnes. Himself.

"It's a Camry," the soldier says. "Now put that belt on — you see how there's a buckle? Go on, now. It's for safety."

"Mr. Barnes? Are we seeing Bucky soon?"

The soldier grips the steering wheel so tight it groans under the strain of his metal hand.

"Sure thing, short stack," he says. "You just sit tight."

The Mission, satisfied, sits back in his seat. The soldier watches in the rearview mirror as he fiddles with the seatbelt until there is a click. They hurtle through the night at seventy miles an hour, but the soldier catalogues—

fear

anxiety

desperation

—and he is afraid it will never be fast enough.

—

The Mission has to eat, and apparently he cannot go into diners wearing only a man's t-shirt without someone calling the police. After the first tearful dinner in the backseat, the soldier veers off the highway in dead of night, when the Mission is sleeping, and he raids a bin marked "clothes and shoes donation." He grabs anything that might be in the Mission's size, and later in the daylight he assesses them for damage and hygiene. He buys the Mission a gas station sandwich, sticks him in a pair of denims that don't seem to be crawling with disease, and they spend a few hours in an empty overnight laundromat with his new haul.

The soldier follows the instructions on the machines and sits on the plastic chairs to wait. He will watch the spin of the clothes in the machine. The Mission, however, is not content to eat his sandwich quietly three seats down, and he climbs into the soldier's lap. The soldier sits sniper-still as the Mission eats his sandwich and flops against his chest.

"What about you?" the Mission says.

"What about me what?" the soldier says.

"Aren't you gonna eat something?"

The soldier's systems do require fuel, but that is secondary to the imperative of getting the Mission to safety.

"Not yet," he says.

"And your clothes?"

“My clothes are fine.”

“They smell.”

“You smell.”

That wins him a little giggle, and the Mission throws his arms around the soldier’s waist. Stiffly, the soldier puts his flesh hand on the Mission’s back and pats him three times.

“When are we going to get Bucky?”

“Soon.”

—

Another state, another diner.

The Mission is listing, overtired and in need of a bath, but he sees the prices on the menus and begins to cry.

The soldier’s innards clench, and he has to do a systems analysis.

Catalogue: alarm, panic, fear.

“Stop that,” the soldier hisses. “Stop that right now.”

“We can’t afford it! We came into a millionaire’s restaurant!”

“Shut up or someone will hear you!”

An approach, not even hidden, bold as brass, and the soldier is poised to attack but it’s just a waitress, just a waitress.

“Did someone wake up grumpy this morning?” she says in a grating, exaggerated voice. The Mission quiets himself, but he still sits across from the soldier with slumping shoulders and big tears rolling down his face. His hair sticks straight up on one side. “Don’t worry,” the waitress says in that twee tone. “We’ll get some pancakes in you and you’ll be right as rain. Do you like the sound of that, big guy, some pancakes?”

“We can’t afford pancakes!” he wails. “These pancakes are for Rockefellers!” The waitress’s mouth opens to gape at him, eyebrows raised. The soldier recognizes that easily enough: she is taken aback. He has never had to handle a person’s emotions before.

“We can afford pancakes,” the soldier says. “Now hush up and order whatever you want.”

The Mission clamps his mouth shut, and he sends the soldier such a look of betrayal that he’s forced to do another systems analysis, but he comes up clean, with nothing to account for the knife’s twist in his diaphragm.

The soldier knows what the Mission will like, anyway.

“Short stack will have a short stack,” he says, “with an easy egg and a side of bacon, too. Lots of syrup. Orange juice.”

The waitress writes frantically, and then asks what he’ll have.

“Uh.” The soldier scans the menu.

“Corned beef hash,” the Mission says, voice warbling. The soldier eyes him over the menu, and he juts out a tiny version of his determined jaw. The waitress’s gaze flicks between them, wary. “He wants corned beef hash and a bagel with lotsa butter.”

The Mission is not wrong.

The soldier folds up his menu and stacks it on top of the Mission’s. He hands them both to the waitress, and when he breaks eye contact with the Mission to look at her, he finds her at a loss.

“And a coffee,” he says. “Black.”

The waitress beats it the hell out of there and the soldier hones back in on the Mission.

“What do you know?” he says.

The Mission slouches further back into the booth and looks off toward the giant jar of sugar, mouth downturned and lower lip sticking out.

“You ain’t Mr. Barnes,” he says.

“So who am I?”

The Mission kicks at the table, but the soldier hardly cares. No one else is in their corner. They’ve scared only the waitress.

“Mr. Barnes has a big freckle on his cheek, and his chin is pointy. And he wouldn’t pay no \$5 for a stack of pancakes Mrs. Barnes could make for a penny. You do a good job, but you still got it wrong.”

“What if I told you money ain’t how it used to be? What if I told you we weren’t in 1923 no more?”

“I’d believe you, because you’re Bucky Barnes and you don’t look like 1923, but I’m still mad.”

“All right,” the soldier says. He exhales and sits back in his booth, letting go of some of the tension in his shoulders. No one’s attacking here. “How’d you know I was... him?”

The Mission puts his cheek on the table and doesn’t look at the soldier at all.

“Your eyes are the same,” he mumbles. “And you have a dimple in your chin like your mama.”

“So. Corned beef hash.”

“And a bagel.”

“Right. But you gotta keep your mouth shut about it, all right?”

The Mission shoves skinny little arms beneath his head. He makes a sound like a squeak the soldier is sure was meant to be a growl.

“Who’ve I got to tell?” the Mission says.

The Mission won't stop kicking the soldier's seat.

"I have to pee I have to pee I have to pee I have to pee I have to pee," he says, and so on.

"Go in that bottle I gave you," the soldier tells him.

"I'm gonna make a mess!"

"No you're not, just — stick it in, you'll be fine."

"I want to pee in a real bathroom!"

"Steve—"

"I have to pee I have to pee I have to pee I have to pee I have to pee!"

"Jesus fucking Christ," the soldier mutters, and behind him the Mission shrieks.

"You have to go to confession for that!" he says. "I'll tell!"

"I have to wait for an exit before I can find you a bathroom," the soldier says.

"No, now! Now now now!"

"Can you just hold your horses?"

"I'm gonna pee! I'm gonna pee! I'm gonna pee!"

"Jesus fucking Christ."

In the middle of the day on an open road while other cars make steady traffic around them, where anyone could see and snipe and steal, the soldier pulls over, enduring the scrape of the Mission's screams against his ear drums when they go over the rumble strip, and hauls the Mission out of the backseat.

"Back against the car, you understand me?" he growls. The Mission nods frantically, but he is doing a dance so urgent he can't pause to get his pants down. The soldier swears again and undoes the button for him before straightening and scanning the horizon for threats. He assumes as defensive a stance as he can manage considering their position in the open and the spray radius of a five-year-old boy. The soldier hears the Mission sigh in relief just as piddle hits the dirt in a slow stream. When he's done, the soldier can hear him zip himself up, and then the weight of his head presses into the soldier's thigh and he hears a ragged sob.

The soldier does one more scan for threats before laying a hand on the Mission's back and risking a glance down at him.

"What's wrong?" he says briskly.

"I don't know," the Mission mumbles.

"Well then quit it. We need to get going." Curious — he is carding his flesh fingers through the Mission's pale sunlight hair. It's almost too soft to feel at all.

"I can't!" the Mission shrieks, and then he's crying harder and harder, and the soldier can feel moisture seeping through the denim onto the skin of his thigh. The soldier glances around before swinging the Mission up under an arm and then throwing himself into the backseat. He slams the

door shut behind them, and he doesn't know what to do but rock the Mission in his arms until his hiccups die down and he is limp with sleep.

The soldier doesn't know what to do doesn't know what to do doesn't know what to do

There are a pair of masters waiting the next time the soldier gases up in the middle of the night. The attendant is stoned and engrossed in a StarkPad, the surveillance system is on the fritz, and the Mission is asleep. There is no one to see the soldier kill both agents and set it up like a murder suicide in their car.

The soldier dumps the Toyota and procures a Dodge. When he discovers this in the morning, the Mission works at honing his disapproving eyebrow.

They're in bumfuck Indiana when the soldier finally takes pity on the Mission and stops for the night at a motel. If his masters — if *HYDRA* — are here, they're buried deep.

The soldier runs a bath while the Mission plays with the buttons on the tube, marveling. He has no idea that the thing must be twenty years old and not exactly state-of-the-art back then. Not that the soldier minds, either.

In the bathroom, there are miniature bottles labeled "shampoo" and "conditioner." There are tiny soaps and tiny combs and tiny toothbrushes and tiny toothpastes. It's as if the motel had short stack in mind.

"Get in here and have a wash," the soldier called. "The television will be there when you're done."

The Mission comes into the bathroom stripping, uniquely unselfconscious the way only children can be, and the soldier averts his eyes. He hears a splash.

"Oh, it's warm! Did you boil water?"

"It comes like that now," the soldier says, gruff. "Do you need help or can I go out?"

"I can do it by myself."

"I'll leave the door open."

"You take a bath after me. You frighten waitresses."

Something that feels like bubbles rumbles out of him. A laugh. The Mission grins up at him, bright and shining, even through the three days of little-boy grime.

"Aye aye, cap'n," the soldier says. "Don't forget behind your ears and between your toes."

"I'll do it *myself*," the Mission says. He turns tail and the soldier catches sight of a little pink bum plopping down into the bathwater. Water sloshes up over the tub and the soldier finds himself reining in the urge to tell the Mission to be careful not to make a mess, not to crack his fool head, not to drown. He shakes his head as if clearing cobwebs and leaves the bathroom.

There is only the one bed. The Mission will take it. The soldier will set up the room's single chair in a corner with a full view of the door and the window. The Mission will sleep and the soldier will keep watch.

“Tell me a story,” the Mission says. Even if he swings his legs as hard as he can, he can’t hit the back of the soldier’s seat in this car while he’s strapped in. Catalogue: relief.

“I don’t know any,” the soldier says.

“Then make one up!”

“How ’bout you tell me one instead?” the soldier says. A glance at the rearview mirror shows the Mission, mouth agape and both brows raised high in delight.

“What kind of story do you want?” the Mission says.

The soldier does not want a story. The soldier wants silence and winding back roads, a defensible position, an arsenal of weapons, and this child, this mission, safer than the soldier can manage right now.

“Whatever you like,” he says, because the chatter will wash over him no matter its contents. He will nod and possibly hum at appropriate intervals. He will keep the Mission from flailing, or shrieking, or crying, or becoming a very small spatter of blood across the soldier’s body.

“Once upon a time there was a boy,” the Mission says. The soldier sees his hands fly up expressively in the rearview. “And the boy found a tiny little dragon sleeping in the garbage dump. Where is your mommy, the boy asked the baby dragon. I just hatched here, said the baby dragon, I don’t have a mommy. You can come home with me! the boy said. I don’t even have a baby brother. Thank you, said the baby dragon. The end!”

It’s the worst story the soldier has ever heard. Admittedly his experience with stories is lacking, but the soldier is very sure of this nonetheless.

“That’s great,” he says anyway. “Let’s hear another.”

“No, now you!”

“It won’t be as good as yours.” As surely as the soldier knows the Mission has spun a terrible story, he knows too that his own efforts will still fall short. Whipping up stories on the fly is not in his skill set. If the Mission wants something from him, why can’t it be a kill shot between a target’s eyes? Why can’t it be something he could offer with competence? But the Mission’s needs now are simpler, and something in the soldier tells him the Mission wouldn’t ask for that no matter what incarnation he occupied.

“You won’t know if you don’t try,” the Mission says. Whether he wants to see them or not, the soldier spies big blue eyes beseeching him in his rearview.

“Right,” the soldier says. He clenches his hands on the steering wheel. “Once upon a time, there was a boy. He was very small and his heart was bigger than his body, so he had to carry it around in a jar with him. Sometimes other kids tried to steal his heart-in-a-jar so they could smash it, but he was willing to fight dirty to keep it. Many people thought he was strange for carrying his heart around outside of him, but he made one friend who thought that was just boss, and together they defended the jar every chance they got. The friend started to wonder why anyone kept their hearts on the inside at all. A heart on the outside meant proof of life. As the boy grew up he watched other people’s hearts grow smaller as their bodies grew bigger, and sometimes they went black and shriveled altogether, but his stayed just the same. One day, a miracle happened and his body grew ten times its size overnight. He was finally able to put his heart in his chest where it belonged. He

was happy, and he didn't notice how his friend missed watching his heart beat in the jar. But it was all right, because they were together, and sometimes growing up means realizing things can't stay the same. The end."

The road is empty and the sun is reaching the point in its trajectory where no amount of adjusting the visor will keep it out of the soldier's eyes. He risks a glance in the rearview and finds the Mission peering through the front seats with a furrow in his brow and the tender pink of his lower lip exposed.

"That one's sad," he says. "What happened to the boy and his friend?"

"They lived happily ever after?" the soldier says.

The Mission slumps back into the seat and casts his gaze out his window. The soldier swallows and fixes his eyes dead ahead to where the road meets the horizon.

"That's all right then, I guess," the Mission says. He clams up, and the soldier has to turn on a fuzzy radio station just to ease the weight of the Mission's new silence.

—

At the next motel, the room is paid for and there is a manila envelope waiting for him. He recognizes the Widow's handwriting and, inexplicably, his heartbeat speeds up. He makes sure the room is secure and the Mission is engrossed in cartoons before he barricades himself in the bathroom with the envelope.

Inside are documents for the both of them. Birth certificates, passports, social security cards. The soldier is Jack Doyle, born May 8th, 1983. The Mission is Steven Doyle, born November 21, 2009. There are no bugs, no trackers, no traces. There is no postal service stamp. There is only the extension of help, and something inside the soldier shudders. His systems analysis comes up clean.

—

"Where are we going?" the Mission asks. He is grasping at the soldier's hand as he skips along beside him, and the soldier doesn't have a protocol for this. Helplessly, he lets it happen. They might attract less attention this way than if they were to keep a careful distance, anyway. They are walking to a bookstore where the soldier intends to steal anything the Mission wants in the hopes that it'll keep him quiet in the car, but he knows if he tells the Mission that he will get only the eyebrow and a shrill threat to "tell."

"The store," the soldier says.

"No, I mean *after*," the Mission says. "Will my ma be there? Do you know where she is? Do I have to go to school?"

"Your ma's back in Brooklyn," the soldier says, and he intended for it to be a lie, but he knows with sudden clarity that it's true. He knows the Mission had a mother — *soft and blonde, a tiny wisp of a woman who smelled of anti-septic and sweet cake batter, who called him heartbreaker and let him stay over whenever his sisters got too loud, who coughed and coughed and coughed until there was no breath left to rattle in her spent lungs* — and that she is gone gone gone, dust in the earth somewhere, indeed, in Brooklyn.

"So can we go home then?" the Mission says.

"Not yet," the soldier says.

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not safe.”

“We playin’ cops and robbers?”

“Ain’t no playin’ about it, short stack,” the soldier says. “Now hush up while we’re in the store, y’hear?”

“But I’m *tired* and I miss my ma and I miss *you* because you’re not really here and you’re no fun and you don’t know anything about anything.”

The soldier grabs a handful of the back of the Mission’s t-shirt and drags him into a defensible doorway before kneeling in front of him to look him in the eye. His mouth is a little downward arc and his eyes are big dinner plate tragedies.

“Listen to me, I need you to listen.” The soldier squeezes the Mission’s biceps. The Mission winces but makes no sound. “Are you listening?” The Mission nods. “Right. Sometimes cops and robbers is more complicated than it seems, and you and me gotta be smarter than both, all right?” The Mission nods again, a big fat tear slipping from one eye to trail down his flushed cheek. “I know it’s no fun, but I need you to be brave and let me get us where we’re going. Brooklyn won’t fall without you.”

“I don’t wanna keep driving,” the Mission says, tilting his chin up. “I’m gonna throw up if we do one more day.”

The soldier knows it’s no idle threat. He also knows boys need sunshine and exercise and snails and what have you. He stands up and scans for threats again. There haven’t been any in three days, and the one three days ago ended up just an ornery old man. The one before that grated out a nasty “hail HYDRA” before he bit his cyanide capsule and robbed the soldier of the kill, but he still disposed of the body where no one would find it. When the soldier catches snippets of the news on diner TVs or talk radio, he hears about the Widow and baby Stark and the mounting battle against what’s left of HYDRA. The Falcon, it seems, operates without the scrutiny of the media on him. The soldier cannot afford to cease in his vigilance, but maybe he can stop running. Maybe he can set up a defensible safe house. Maybe there’s something he can do to shake the stubborn lines of misery from a face too young to hold them.

“Fine,” he says. “The next cowpoke town we pass, we’ll see what we can do about planting our behinds, all right?”

The Mission valiantly tries to hide a snuffle, but when the soldier stands to continue on his way to the book store, the Mission stretches his arms up and makes his eyes even bigger. The soldier hesitates only for a nanosecond before sticking his hands under the Mission’s armpits and hauling him up into his arms. His weight is negligible, and he tucks his face into the soldier’s neck before letting himself go limp.

A tightening about the rib cage.

A clean systems analysis.

The Mission picks out a set of colored pencils and drawing paper, some watercolors, a lot of books about dinosaurs, ancient Egypt, and mythological creatures, some age-inappropriate chapter books, a game called Boggle and another called Jenga, three coloring books, a three-dimensional puzzle depicting the Colosseum in Rome, a bag of chocolate truffles, a tea mug, and an Iron Man action figure the soldier wasn't quick enough to keep him away from.

The Mission turns those awful eyes on him, and the soldier pays for the entire haul.

They drive for two more days and the Mission cries so much he makes himself sick.

The soldier figures it was time to ditch the Dodge anyway.

Montana is empty space and nothing but sky and prairie for miles. You could go weeks without seeing another human being, and any threat would be immediately identified in the vast flatness of the landscape. The soldier finds a paranoid anti-government cattle rancher whose family hasn't used banks since 1928 to sell him a piece of land with a furnished cabin on it for \$1000 cash in hand.

The rancher also has a mess of herding puppies he wants rid of.

"Hell, I'll give you back a hundred bucks if you take as many as you can carry," the rancher says.

The puppies aren't the kind that can be held in one hand. They're young, but most of them are full-grown, and they're big, excitable things. There must be fifteen of them running madly around the barn, mutts of all different flavors. The Mission is buried beneath a blanket in the beaten old pickup truck the soldier procured, out of sight as ordered, but if he's gonna have a dog, he'd better be the one to pick it out.

The soldier does an inventory of the man before him and comes up with someone who would keep his mouth shut if anyone in a suit or uniform ever happened on his property. Or possibly he'd bury a few slugs in them before any questions were asked, but that wasn't the soldier's problem.

"Just one'll do," the soldier says, "but I'll have to consult the big boss."

He leaves the rancher to gather up his horde of puppies. At the truck, the soldier swings the passenger door open and lifts one corner of the blanket. His mouth tilts up when he sees the Mission's scowly little face squint against the sun.

"*What?*" the Mission says as if he's a big man interrupted in important work.

"Just wonderin' if his highness wants a puppy in his new digs, but if not..."

The Mission shrieks and falls ass over teakettle out of the truck. The soldier catalogues a thing called *mirth*, which is coming out of him in waves of laughter as the Mission scrambles up only to throw his arms around the soldier's knees.

"Really?" he says, voice gone shrill. "You're not funnin'?"

The soldier has excellent balance as a system requirement, and thus does not tip over when the Mission hobbles him. He sets his flesh hand in the Mission's hair and brushes the messy fringe away from his brow.

“Better pick the best one, all right?”

The Mission tears off screaming in the direction of the barn. The soldier does a pocket check for the inhaler he bought two states ago. It’s there. It’s always there.

He watches as the Mission pitches himself to the ground and lets a pack of dogs swarm over him with their slobbery tongues and clumsy paws. He’s squealing at a pitch that tears at the soldier’s ears, but the soldier can only stand there with his mouth curved upward. There’s no accounting for it.

The rancher appears at the soldier’s side.

“That your boy?” he says gruffly.

“Yeah,” the soldier says.

“Does a boy good, havin’ a dog,” the rancher says. The soldier has nothing left to say, so he leaves it at that.

The soldier lets the Mission play for a long time. If he gets tired out, he’ll sleep well tonight, and maybe he won’t clamber into the soldier’s lap all bony and smelly asking for a story. He picks out a big gentle girl pup who looks like a German shepherd got fresh with a border collie, and he won’t let the soldier put her in the truck bed. She sits in his lap for miles and miles, all the way out to the cabin, and the Mission chatters at her the whole way there.

—

The cabin is small, with the kitchen and living area making up one room, and a bedroom with two single beds making up the other. There’s a bathroom “just for us!” that the Mission keeps running into and checking. The Mission names the dog Ruthie, after a girl he absolutely does not have a crush on back home.

“Tell me about her,” the soldier says as he puts away the Mission’s things.

The Mission gets a little furrow in his brow. The soldier resists the urge to smooth it away.

“Well... she’s black and brown with white spots? Her ears are up but sometimes down?”

“No, short stack, I mean the girl. What’s she like?”

“Oh.” The Mission spreads his arms and flops into one narrow twin bed. “You’re the one who lives next to her. Don’t you remember?”

It’s there and gone in the space of a second: a skinny girl with lots of black curly hair playing marbles. But when the image dissipates like vapor, there’s nothing the soldier can do to call it back.

“It was a long time ago for me,” the soldier says. “You should remind me.”

“What year is it really?” the Mission says. He reaches a hand out and grips the soldier’s pant leg.

The soldier just looks at him for a while, until the Mission raises both eyebrows and levels a disconcertingly parental look at him. *Don’t you disappoint me, James Barnes.* Another flash, there and gone.

“2014,” the soldier says.

“Did we come here in a spaceship?” the Mission says.

“Not quite.”

“Then how?”

“It’s really complicated,” the soldier says.

“That’s what grown-ups say when they want to treat you like you’re a dumb baby,” the Mission says.

The soldier worries the sleeve of a tiny shirt in his fingers before he sets it down in the dresser. He turned around and sits on the edge of the Mission’s bed. He stares at the wall and swallows.

“It doesn’t sound real when I think about explaining it,” he says, hoarse. “Sometimes... sometimes I worry that nothing I’m experiencing is real, and I’m really just walking through hell. Or this is what I’ve imagined in the moments right before my death, as I’m falling so short and so long at once. I’m worried I’m not real, and I’m not alive, and I’m not sane, and the only things left are pain and fear.”

The cabin is still and silent. There’s a faint rattle in the Mission’s breath, and the dog snuffles in her sleep. The soldier wonders if it’s possible for someone’s chest to crack right open. He feels cleaved in two, vulnerable and rotten all at once. He squeezes his eyes shut, but the interminable moment during which the truth of what he feels threatens to break him with its utterance passes, and he feels the Mission plaster himself like a mollusk to his side. Without the input of his brain, the soldier settles an arm around the Mission’s whipcord body and lets the touch ease whatever ragged wound he just inflicted on himself.

“I think you’re real,” the Mission says. A little hand snakes around his hip, grasps at any available skin, and twists. The soldier catalogues negligible pain and a fond annoyance. He grunts and winces away. “See?” The Mission grins up at him, angelic light and batted eyelashes, and the soldier has to laugh again. With a gentle push, he drops the Mission onto the mattress and digs his fingertips into the Mission’s ribs until he’s squealing and shrieking with laughter, until the dog howls and jumps on the bed along with them, until the soldier forgets, just for these fleeting moments, that this whole endeavor is fragile as a blown egg.

—

At night, the soldier reads to the Mission until he is hoarse, until the Mission is asleep on his chest, until the soldier’s own eyelids droop enough to make the words swim on the page.

—

In town, which is two streets boasting a general store, a gas station, a diner, the police and fire department headquarters, three different churches, and one big school house for all kids K-12, the soldier gets the Mission a cowboy hat and little red cowboy boots with blunted play spurs. The Mission puts them on immediately and begins swaggering around the general store with his fists planted on his hips, charming every big-haired lady and scowl-faced man alike.

“Watch out for that one,” says the cashier. “He’ll be a heartbreaker.”

The soldier considers all interactions with others a form of being undercover. He makes a curve with his mouth and snorts.

“Already breaks my heart every damn day,” he says.

“Real bitch, ain’t it?” the cashier says. “How they grow up.”

The soldier makes a vague sound of agreement.

“What grade’s he in, kindergarten? First?”

“Um.”

The cashier leans in conspiratorially.

“I bet you can make it last another year or two before the sheriff knocks on your door telling you you gotta send him to school,” she whispers. “If I coulda froze time with my youngest, I woulda. Now he’s stinky and disagreeable, but back then, boy.” She nods at the Mission, who is occupied stacking boxes of ant repellent as high as they’ll go on one shelf. “Back then, I was his whole world.”

The Mission twists around and beams big at him. He waves, and the soldier waves back.

“He got a mama?”

The soldier turns back around to find the cashier making big eyes at him. After a quick review of the situation, he comes to the conclusion that can afford neither her ongoing pursuit of him nor the ill-will a rejection will garner him. He makes the decision in a nanosecond and drops his gaze to the counter, letting his lashes do the heavy lifting.

“She died a while back,” he says, gruff. “We don’t talk about it.”

“Oh you poor thing! And moving to a new place and everything!”

“We muddle through,” he says. He picks up his bags. “Thanks for this.”

“If you need anything, anything at all, I’m Mabel and I’m here most days. You just call up.”

He quirks a corner of his mouth and nods. He moves toward the exit and extends an arm the Mission’s way.

“Come on, short stack,” he says. The Mission skips up to him and puts his hand in the soldier’s. It’s tiny and grubby, and the soldier grips it like a lifeline.

—

The soldier makes the Mission eat fruits and vegetables, lots of lean protein and at least one red meat meal a week. He knows he is afraid of what will happen if he doesn’t, but all the systems analyses in the world will not tell him why.

—

In November, the snows come, and the Mission falls in love.

He is bundled in so many layers he’s practically a sphere. Ruthie bounds around him in circles, leaping into every snow drift as the Mission waddles along after her. The soldier watches from inside, where he’s doing the dishes. The Mission talks to Ruthie earnestly, but the soldier cannot discern what he says.

There have been no threats for months. There has been no contact from the Widow for months. Christmas is coming, and the Mission hasn’t mentioned his mother for a long time. Children, he

knows, forget.

The two of them can settle here. They can make a life. The soldier can sleep with one eye open instead of two, and the Mission can grow up happy and normal. No worries about money. No dead parents and the threat of an orphanage.

When the dishes are done, he gets out two mugs and a saucepan. He pours out two cups worth of milk and sets the burner to medium high heat. He pulls out the cocoa and the sugar and the vanilla and the whipped cream. When he has two steaming mugs of hot chocolate on the table, he goes to the door and swings it wide.

Ruthie and the Mission are lying out making snow angels. As far as the soldier can tell, the Mission is telling Ruthie a story about Martians who eat umbrellas.

"I've got hot cocoa for cold little boys!" the soldier calls. The Mission pops up and struggles to get to his feet. The soldier valiantly does not laugh at him.

He towels off the dog before she can go tearing through to cabin all wet, and then he helps the Mission extract himself from his snow clothes. The Mission's nose and cheeks are bright red, and when his hat comes off, his hair sticks straight up.

"I wish it snowed all year!" he says.

"Nah, you'd get tired of it," the soldier says. "Treats are treats because they only happen once in a while."

The Mission denies it vehemently, even as he snuffles and wipes his nose on his sleeve over and over.

"Sure, pal," the soldier says. The Mission puts his hands on the soldier's shoulders as he helps him out steps out of his bulky snow pants. Freed, the Mission scrambles to sit on a chair at the kitchen table while the soldier puts all the wet garments in the hamper. When he gets back, the Mission wears his most innocent look, but there is whipped cream on his nose. The soldier's heart swells. He doesn't do a systems analysis.

The soldier slides into his customary seat across from the Mission. He taps his mug against the Mission's and they both take a drink. The Mission makes a loud satisfied sound after his first gulp, and the soldier reaches over to wipe the whipped cream off his face. The Mission squirms but allows it.

"I wanted to talk to you," the soldier says.

The Mission sits up as straight as his back will allow and puts on what the soldier has come to think of as his serious grown-up face.

"About what?"

"School," the soldier says. He clears his throat. "It's...not good for you, being here with just me."

"But won't you be lonely?"

"I won't."

"Yes you will."

“Don’t start that, short stack.” The soldier knows exactly where that game goes: nowhere fast.
“Listen. You’ll meet other kids in school. You’ll get to learn all sorts of different things. Isn’t that exciting?”

“What about Ruthie?”

“Ruthie will be fine.”

“What about....the fridge?”

“Steve.”

The Mission’s face crumples and he lays his head on the table with a thunk the soldier doesn’t like. The soldier sighs and sets his flesh hand into the Mission’s hair.

“You’re gonna love school,” he murmurs. “You’re gonna make a bunch of friends and get smarter than me. You’re gonna want to forget about me altogether.”

A high, mournful sound escapes the Mission’s throat, and he slides off his chair to clamber into the soldier’s lap. He hugs the soldier as tight around the waist as he can, face mashed into his chest, and the soldier in turn buries his nose in golden hair that smells of fresh fallen snow.

—

The Mission’s drawings line the walls, the refrigerator, the dashboard of the pick-up.

—

Outside the school on the Mission’s first day, the soldier kneels before him for one last quiz.

“What’s your name?”

“Steven Doyle.”

“What’s your birthday?”

“November 21, 2009.”

“Where are you from?”

“Back east.”

“Where do you live?”

“Yonder.”

“Where’s your mama?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“Your daddy?”

“The handsomest devil this side of the Mississippi.”

The soldier cracks a grin and stands back up.

“Perfect,” he says. He takes the Mission’s hand and together they walk into the school. He’ll be in

first grade. There will be sixteen other kids in the first grade. The soldier will sit on a bench in the main office every day until it's time to collect his mission and leave.

—

Sometimes, the soldier wakes up to a little body climbing into his bed and inserting itself into the hollows of him. The soldier goes right back to sleep, warm.

—

Before Christmas, the Mission brings home a drawing he calls, "My Family." In it are some blobs, which he names for the soldier.

"This is me," he says, pointing. "This is Ruthie. Over there is Brooklyn, and that's my ma, see her, see her in Brooklyn?"

"Sure do, short stack."

"That's the sun, and that's the house, and that's some cows and their poops."

"Wow."

"And that's you," he says, "and that's your muscle arm and that's your special arm."

"That's great, bud."

"Hey, Buck? How'd you get your special arm?"

There and gone—

Steve, the whites of his eyes, a hand outstretched

Fingertips graze

Bucky!

Hail Mary full of shit the devil take you blessed art thou amongst us sinners Amen Amen Amen

He's falling and he's screaming and he's hitting ground and he's rolling cracking tearing, he is bright-hot all-consuming pain, he is the fire and the cold and the fear. He is. He is. He

—gone and there.

The soldier heaves in a deep breath. When he opens his eyes, the Mission is peering over him with high inquisitive eyebrows and his little rosebud mouth hanging open.

"Bucky?" he's saying. Two damp little hands pat at his cheeks, increasingly frantic. "Bucky? I'm sorry? Bucky, I'm sorry!"

The soldier grasps both of the Mission's hands in his. He hushes him, voice cracking.

"I'm fine," he says, "I'm fine."

"You don't have to tell."

"Just — just shush."

He gathers the Mission into his arms and they sit together on the couch, rocking just a little. The dog whuffles and whines, shoving her nose underneath the soldier's legs. They stay like that until the light outside the cabin dims, throwing shadows that elongate until they disappear altogether.

"It was a long time ago," the soldier says into the Mission's hair. "It doesn't matter anymore."

The Mission's hand twists in the cotton of the soldier's shirt.

When the soldier sees a newspaper, which is about once a week when he goes to the store for supplies, he makes sure the Mission doesn't get a look. The headlines, even a year later, always boast some variation on, "WHAT HAPPENED TO STEVE ROGERS? WHERE IS CAPTAIN AMERICA? WHAT WILL WE DO WITHOUT OUR HERO?"

The well-being of the nation is not his mission.

The soldier sits in the school's main office unmoving. There is a kernel of quietude inside him he returns to while he waits for the Mission to finish for the day. It balances something his systems analyses cannot. He is aware that his stillness disturbs the ladies who bustle around the office doing school business, but their bother doesn't concern him. He knows, also, that word around a small town is like wildfire, and with very little effort on his part, he has become a tragic figure to them: the bereaved widower who cannot let his boy out of his sight for fear of what will become of him. It's romantic and gives the denizens of this no-man's-land something to sigh over. The office hens may cluck, but if they truly didn't like the gossip fodder sitting stock still in their office, they would find a way to get rid of him. So he sits, and he spirits himself away.

But he can't ignore it when someone taps him repeatedly on the shoulder.

He blinks.

"Mr. Doyle?"

The soldier grunts.

"Hi, Mr. Doyle." It's the youngest secretary, plump and red-haired with an open face that flushes too easily. He knew everything about her within five seconds of meeting her: grew up in this town, wanted to go to college but couldn't afford it, experienced social isolation when her peers decided she thought she was too fancy for them, desperately wants a child but has no one to make one with and is too self-conscious to do the normal thing of going for a roll in the hay in the back some guy's truck. She's talking at him, and he has to hope she isn't eying him up as a potential candidate. The soldier blinks again.

"Sorry, what was that?"

"I said, would you like to do some volunteer work around the school? We could always use some, and maybe you'd enjoy it. You could even see Steven once in a while."

Her eyes are clear and her cheeks wear only the blush she put on them this morning.

"What would I have to do?" the soldier says.

"There's a bunch of options, like helping in the cafeteria, or being an extra adult eye at recess, or

lending a hand in some of the enrichment classes like phys ed or music or art. You could mix it up, do something different every day.”

He wears a glove to cover himself, but the soldier pulls his sleeve over his metal hand anyway, an habitual tic that has resulted in the frayed left cuffs of his entire shirt collection. He knows he should curb the impulse, but these days he finds he is resistant to disallowing himself anything that feels good.

“All right,” he says. The secretary smiles. He creaks when he stands, and he feels the collective weight of four pairs of eyes on him as he follows the secretary out of the office.

—

There is so much dog hair in the cabin that the soldier thinks they could make another dog out of it. The Mission giggles when he says so and begs him to keep it.

“It’s dirty,” the soldier says. “I swept it up with all the dirt and gunk on the floor. It’s no good for anything.”

“But we can *make* things with it!”

“It’s just garbage, bud.”

“It’s not!”

The soldier sighs.

“Tell you what,” he says. “Next time we’re at the store, I’ll get some fake fur and stuffing and you can make whatever you want with that.”

The Mission wears a mutinous little expression and holds eye contact as he pets Ruthie hard and lets loose another tuft of fur, but the soldier considers it a battle won.

—

In the cafeteria, the soldier sees the Mission befriend a second grader no one else will sit with.

—

In the art room, the soldier collects all the cast-off detritus of a whole school’s worth of craft projects for the Mission’s use at home.

—

At recess, the soldier learns that children are immeasurably cruel, and full of boundless compassion.

—

One day, the Mission decides to go to school wearing his entire cowboy get up. The soldier watches from his place in the periphery of his school life as the Mission is alternately teased and complimented. The soldier doesn’t know what to do, since he can neither threaten to kill the children who hurt the Mission nor embrace the children who praise him until their breath has left them, so he stands back and lets it all happen. Watches the Mission deal with it all himself. Sees the Mission becoming someone who can and will be the hero the entire country misses.

In the springtime, there is nothing the soldier can do, no one the soldier can shoot through the skull, as a sniffle turns into a sore throat turns into a fever. The Mission takes up so much space with his presence and his dog and his drawings and his stories that it's easy to forget that his body is so small, and so frail, and so susceptible to microscopic predators. He is burning up and delirious, insisting he's freezing, sobbing when the soldier takes his blankets away and dabs his flushed skin with a cool rag. His heartbeat is rapid, thready and weak.

"Please let me do this," the soldier says. "Please, I promise it'll be better this way, please."

"My skin!" the Mission shrieks. "My skin!" He screams so much he throws up, and underneath the bed the dog begins to howl.

The soldier feels a terrible prickling in his eyes and humidity in his throat. He does a systems analysis; it fails. He racks his brain; it fails. He yanks at the long tangled mess of his own hair, and in his arms the Mission shakes so violently that he almost pitches them off the bed.

There, and gone again—

The soldier has done this before.

The twist in his diaphragm is familiar, as well as the panic at the edge of his consciousness. He closes his eyes, and when he opens them again, he knows what to do.

Please, Lord, take me instead.

He gathers the Mission up and bundles him into the truck. Ruthie whines to be left behind, but it's two hours to the closest hospital and he can't have the extra distraction.

He sends up his thanks for the vast emptiness of the state of Montana, where no one can catch him going a hundred miles an hour.

How many candles has he lit over the course of his life in the name of Steven Grant Rogers? How many rosaries has he counted, and how many times has he tried to bargain with God?

At the hospital, the Mission is unconscious and limp in the soldier's arms, and the soldier is distantly aware that he is screaming and it is inappropriate, but he doesn't care doesn't care doesn't care. Nurses whisk the Mission away while security guards restrain the soldier in the waiting room, where half a dozen waiting patients goggle at him in alarm.

He finally calms enough that the staff stop threatening to call the police when a nurse approaches to tell him, *We got Steven's fever down and he's stable, Mr. Doyle. We'd really appreciate if you could fill out his paperwork now.*

He is a human being, not an animal. Not a machine. He has control over himself. After the paperwork's done, he sits with his elbows planted on his knees and his hands linked together over the crown of his skull. The nurse leaves, and, reluctantly, the security guards. He counts each inhale.

Ten.

Forty-two.

One hundred and nineteen.

Three hundred and sixty-one.

One thousand eight hundred and seventy-nine.

Four thousand two hundred and eight.

A body settles into the seat beside his, and he reins in the urge to snarl at it. He makes the mistake — *the stupid goddamn rookie born fuckin' yesterday mistake* of catching his seat mate's gaze with his peripheral vision.

"Evenin'," the man says. He's wearing a very damning collar. The soldier grunts at him. "I wonder," he goes on, "if you would accept a prayer tonight?"

It's a Methodist hospital, the soldier remembers. They probably have roving ministers, bestowing their empty comforts to the patients in order of desperation level.

"We ain't Methodist," he says.

"That's okay," the minister says. "There are representatives from other denominations available, if you'd prefer."

"We're Catholic," the soldier blurts.

He hasn't been a Catholic in seventy years. More than that, probably. Gave up thinking any of it was real before he ever left school, but God's name had a way of falling from his lips whenever the Mission was in trouble. The soldier supposes that makes him some kind of hypocrite, but on the list of sins to shoulder, he can't find the energy to martyr himself to that one too much.

The minister nods, knitting his brow in an expression of regret.

"I'm afraid we're short a nun tonight," he says. "I'm sorry about that, but if it wouldn't bother you, I'd like to keep you and your boy in my prayers."

"Thank you," the soldier croaks. He clears his throat. "Thanks."

The minister smiles and pats him on the hand. He falters at the unyielding touch of metal beneath the soldier's glove, but gets his bearings back quick enough and curls his hand wholly around it. He closes his eyes and tucks his chin to his chest, and after a moment the soldier follows suit.

"Lord Jesus Christ, Good Shepherd of the sheep, you gather the lambs in your arms and carry them in your bosom. We commend to your loving care this child..."

"Steve."

"This child Steve. Relieve his pain, guard him from danger, restore to him your gifts of gladness and strength, and raise him up to a life of service to you. In your Name we pray, Amen."

"Amen."

The soldier will take any help he can get.

Don't you go dyin' on me. Who would I rescue out of back alleys if you croaked?

You'll be fine. No one — no one to drag you down anymore.

Hey. Don't talk like that. You'll be right as rain and gettin' into scrapes this time tomorrow.

Bucky, if, if—

Shut up, Steve. Just shut up right now.

Just don't want you to mope. If it happens.

Ain't got nothin' to mope about, do I? Now save your breath, you mook.

—

How many times had he summoned a priest to their apartment to give the Mission his last rites?

—

You're a good boy, James.

Thanks, Mrs. Rogers.

Stevie sure does appreciate your sitting inside with him, nice summer day like this. I appreciate it, too.

I'd rather be with Steve inside than with everyone else outside, ma'am.

Yes, I know. You're a good boy.

—

The dog has probably shit in the soldier's bed by now.

—

A nurse comes out and says, "Do you want to see Steve?" and the soldier is on his feet in half a second.

"Yeah," he says. "Yes. Please."

She slants a sympathetic look at him but keeps her distance as she turns to lead him through doors that read 'authorized personnel only.'

"He's going to be okay," she says. She's very short, and her brisk pace matches the soldier's own long strides. "He's got pneumonia, and while we'd like to keep him another night to make sure he's comfortable, he's going to recover. But we do have some concerns about his general health we'd like to discuss with you."

"He's — he was premature," the soldier says. The words come tumbling out of him, truthful little surprises that had been waiting on the tip of his tongue. "His lungs didn't develop so good. He has some kinda heart valve defect, and scoliosis, and um, ear infections all the time. He had mumps, and chicken pox, and scarlet fever one time. He has asthma. I — I try to keep him bundled up. I get that, what do you call it, that antibacterial stuff for your hands that's cold. I make sure he eats the best stuff, I make sure."

The nurse pauses at a door and fixes him with a fathomless look. The soldier is supposed to be good at this, at deciphering the codes of expression in people's faces, he's trained, he's programmed, but it's slipping through his fingers like sand and he has no idea what's behind this woman's eyes right now.

"He's been through a lot," she says softly.

"He's tough."

A nod, a faint grimace in the place of a smile.

"Is he immunocompromised?"

"I don't — I never heard anyone say that about him."

"We'll figure it out. There are some prescriptions and therapies available to him, but we can talk about all of that later. Ready?"

The soldier nods and wipes his palm on his jeans. The nurse pushes the door open to reveal the Mission, his tiny body swallowed up in hospital bedding. He's hooked up to a heart monitor and a saline drip. He blinks fuzzily at the soldier when he walks in, and then breaks into a grin that splits his whole face wide. The sun parting the clouds.

The soldier, in turn, feels his own mouth spread and curve. He can't help it.

"Hey, bud," he says, sliding into the chair beside the bed. The Mission extends his arms, and the soldier leans over to gather him gently to his chest.

The Mission whispers, in that six-year-old way that's not a whisper at all, "2015 is *fancy*."

The soldier feels the bubble of a laugh escape his throat even as his eyes heat. He doesn't bother doing a systems analysis.

"Sure is, short stack," he says. He extracts himself from the tangle of the Mission's arms and sits back in his seat. He smooths out the bedding. In his peripheral vision, he sees the nurse slide silently out of the room. "They treat you all right in here?"

The Mission's breath is still short, and he's tired. He flops back into his pillows like a puppet whose strings have been cut. His hair sticks straight up. The soldier reaches over with his metal hand to pat it down, and the Mission's eyelids flutter shut.

"Yeah," he says, faint. "I got Jello. Do you know Jello?"

"Sure do."

"I got some."

"Good," the soldier says. "That's good."

"Can we make some at home?"

"Any kind you like."

"There are kinds?"

"All colors and flavors."

“Maybe blue,” the Mission says. “Maybe blue and green and orange and purple and white and black.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Is Ruthie all right?”

“She’s great, pal.”

“I’m bored.”

“I know,” the soldier says. “We’ll find something for you to draw on later, all right?”

The Mission gives his best effort at a nod, but he’s falling asleep. The soldier strokes his hair. He leans in and brushes his lips against the Mission’s brow. When the Mission’s eyes won’t stay open anymore, the soldier carefully settles his head on the Mission’s chest and listens to his heartbeat.

—

The hospital staff know not to try and remove the soldier from the Mission’s room, even when it’s not visiting hours, even when it’s three in the morning, even if it’s to offer him a bed of his own.

—

Bucky, you can’t afford this.

You let me worry about what I can afford, Rogers.

But it’s — this is a really good cut of meat, Buck.

Yep, and it’s mine, and I’m giving it to my best guy, so just hush up already and say, ‘Gee golly, thanks good buddy, you sure know how to treat a fella.’

Gee golly, Buck. Thank you.

Just work on getting better, all right?

—

In the distance, helicopters.

—

The soldier is on his feet and ready when a past mission sweeps through the door.

Fury, Nicholas J.

Colonel.

Director.

Nothing and no one.

The soldier stands at attention as Fury’s single-eyed gaze lays bare all the soldier’s weaknesses.

“You look like shit, Barnes,” Fury says, antagonistically cheery.

“What can I say,” the soldier says, “personal grooming’s just not high on my list of priorities.”

Fury smiles then, a strange, unkind thing.

“You sound like a real boy, these days,” he says.

“What do you want, Director?”

“Ain’t director of shit,” Fury says. He peers past the roadblock of the soldier’s body for a glimpse of the Mission, who is sleeping in a complicated twist, mouth hanging open, hair a matted crown of gold. “Got a solution to your little problem.”

“He’s not a problem,” the soldier growls, and Fury slants his mouth at him as if he’s a quaint thing to be patronized.

“He’s in a hospital bed half dead, and it’s not gonna be the last time. Might not always be so lucky.”

“So what, you were just waiting in the wings for something to happen to him? You all of the sudden have a cure? Just when I—” The soldier snaps his mouth shut and swallows down the geyser of words.

Fury straightens and looks him dead in the eye.

“Got a hold of it in a cell we dismantled about a year ago, a few months after you went underground. Thought it would be prudent to keep him like he was until the HYDRA threat could be neutralized. You’re good at hiding, Sergeant. You did right by him.”

The soldier sneers.

“Ain’t sergeant of shit.”

Fury snorts out a single humorless laugh.

“Guess that makes us a matched pair,” he says.

“HYDRA’s still out there,” the soldier says. His *gut* says.

“Do you know how Hercules slayed the hydra in the springs of Amyone?”

“...what?”

“He beheaded it over and over, but where one head fell two would sprout up.” The soldier stares. Fury’s gaze never falters. “Until he learned to burn each severed neck to ash.”

“And you’ve got a Russian friend who knows all about scorched earth,” the soldier says.

Fury’s smile is full of teeth.

“We been cleaning house, Mr. Barnes. And maybe it’s time for you and the half pint to come in from the cold.”

The soldier turns his back to Fury and leans his hands on the bedrail. He watches the stable rise and fall of the Mission’s narrow chest.

“We could stay like this,” he whispers. There is silence, and then he hears the shift of Fury’s

weight from one foot to the other.

“Best to check him out in the morning, take him home,” Fury says. “We’ll meet you there.”

With a swish of the coat, the soldier is alone again. He lifts the Mission up, careful not to disturb all the wires and tubes, and makes room for himself in the bed. He lays the Mission against his chest and uses his heartbeat to keep time.

—

He thinks about taking the short stack and running.

He thinks about how the Mission will grow to hate him if he did.

He thinks about the man the Mission became once, is destined to become again.

He thinks about this frail and fragile body.

He thinks about Bucky Barnes.

—

In the morning, the Mission’s condition is stable and he has a load of prescriptions to his name. The soldier checks him out and secures him in the truck.

“Are we going home?” the Mission asks.

“Yes,” the soldier says.

“Do you think Ruthie forgot me?”

“No,” the soldier says.

“Do you think the kids at school forgot me?”

“No.”

“Are you mad at me?”

The soldier’s hands tighten on the steering wheel.

“No,” he says. “Never ever, do you hear me?”

“Okay.” The Mission’s voice is small and cowed, still congested. The soldier grits his teeth and turns up the radio.

—

The soldier knows Fury and the Widow have been by the cabin because Ruthie is fed, and any messes she made have been cleaned out of existence. She is so excited she runs around them in a circle, barking frantically as the Mission laughs and tries to get her to calm down. She almost knocks him clear over, and the soldier has to kneel down and hold her back, murmuring “easy, girl, easy,” as he gentles her greeting kisses.

Wherever they are, Fury and the Widow allow them the time to take Ruthie for a long meandering walk under the blanket of perfect Montana sky, which the Mission mostly spends perched on the

soldier's shoulders. He slides off when they stop for a game of fetch, but instead of playing along, he lists against the soldier's side. When they get back to the cabin, the door is unlocked, Ruthie growls, and the soldier shields the Mission with his body. He opens the door to find Fury sitting back in their second-hand recliner, and the Widow sipping tea at the kitchen table. Behind him, he feels the Mission clutch at his jeans.

"I was never hiding, was I," the soldier says.

"Not from us, Mr. Barnes," Fury says. The kind tone doesn't jibe with what he knows of the man, and something inside the soldier burns.

"Introduce the kid before he pisses his pants, Barnes," the Widow says. She swivels in her seat to uncross her legs and hold her hands out for the dog, who wags her tail and trots over to lick them like a big fluffy traitor.

The soldier kneels down in front of the Mission, who turns big betrayed eyes on him, limned with tears. He's shaking and his nose is red. The soldier is sure that whatever is breaking inside him right now will never be repaired. He slides his hands down the Mission's arms and holds his wrists loosely.

"Hey," he says, quiet. "We're gonna be okay."

"No one's ever been here before."

"I know, bud. Do you trust me?"

A nod, no hesitation. The soldier cups the Mission's face and presses his lips to his forehead, his eyes. He wraps his arms around him and holds him close. The Mission leaves tears and snot on the soldier's neck and clings with both arms and legs, but they cannot stay that way.

"These folks are gonna make you big and strong," he says. "Would you like that?"

The Mission makes a mournful sound that's no answer at all, and the soldier extricates himself from the tangle of little boy limbs before nudging him to stand in front of him. The Widow is there with her *I'm innocuous, underestimate me* face on, which the Mission scowls up at, unconvinced. The soldier feels a smile touch his lips even as his innards twist him up.

"Hey, Steve," the Widow says. "My name's Natasha, and this is my friend Nick. I promise we're your friends and we're not gonna hurt you, okay?"

"I don't know you," the Mission says.

"Every stranger's just a friend you haven't met yet, right?"

"No," the Mission says. The soldier laughs even as his eyes heat, and he leans forward enough to press his lips into the Mission's hair one last time.

"That's fair," the Widow says.

"I like this one better than the Big Gulp version," Fury says. He has Ruthie's leash wound short around one hand.

The Mission gropes backward until his hand finds the soldier's, and the soldier squeezes tight. The Widow takes out something that looks like a taser, and Fury takes that as his cue to produce a Captain America-sized shirt and pants from somewhere in his coat.

The Mission twists around until he can meet the soldier's eyes.

"Bucky?" he says.

"I've got you," the soldier says.

"I don't understand."

"I promise you will in a minute, all right?"

"I'm scared."

The soldier uses his free hand, his metal hand, to smooth down the freestanding fluff of the Mission's hair.

"Can you be brave for me?" he says. The Mission nods. The Widow sets one end of the taser to the Mission's chest. The soldier flicks his eyes up to meet hers. She will never be safe if this ends badly, and she nods minutely to acknowledge his threat.

"Hold on, kid," she says, and presses down on the trigger.

The little cabin he's made a home of fills with shrieks of pain and the chaos of Ruthie's barking. The soldier holds tight to the Mission as electricity racks his tiny body, but before he can knock the Widow and her torture device away, he finds himself crushed beneath the weight of a naked super soldier.

The Mission slides off him, disoriented, and the soldier staggers to his feet. Fury and the Widow stand back, Ruthie howls the house down, and the Mission and the soldier stare at each other in a moment's singular stillness amid the mayhem.

The soldier meets eyes the color of a summer storm and his heart breaks.

"Buck," the Mission gasps, and reaches out a shaking hand.

The soldier, the *coward*, James Buchanan Barnes, turns tail and beats it the hell out of the cabin.

—

Under that great big sky and its ruffle of churning clouds, Bucky can tell himself there's nothing to repent for.

End

End Notes

This is the first story in a two-story arc. The next story is coming soon.

But not if you bother me about it. Seriously. Don't even ask. The subscribe button is there for a reason.

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